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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GABORONE 000601

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [BEXP](#) [BC](#)

SUBJECT: GABORONE'S LOOMING WATER SHORTAGE

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Gaborone Dam, the primary source of water for over 250,000 people in the Greater Gaborone area, is at a four-year low. Without significant inflows, which are unlikely to materialize, the dam will fail in three months. The GOB's short-term solution is to rely on a notoriously faulty pipeline from a dam in the less-arid northeast. While water restrictions have reduced demand to match the capacity of this pipeline, the Government needs to do more to improve its water management. To meet the long-term growth in demand, the GOB has advanced plans for constructing a large dam (capacity 400 million cubic meters) also in the northeast. This USD 175 million project and other impending water-related infrastructure projects provide an opportunity to support Botswana's economy and assist US companies to bid on substantial contracts. END SUMMARY.

WATER CRISIS LOOMING IN GABORONE

[1](#)2. (U) Without a major increase in rainfall - and the rainy season is now ending - the Gaborone Dam, the primary source of water for over 250,000 people in the Greater Gaborone area, is likely to fail within three months. The dam contains only 23 percent of its capacity of 141.4 million cubic meters, a four-year low. Although water restrictions have reduced demand by roughly 25 percent, the declining water supply in southeastern Botswana is likely to force the Water Utilities Company (WUC) to rely on water piped from the northeast of the country, where rains have been more plentiful.

[1](#)3. (U) Letsibogo dam (100 million cubic meters), located near Selebi-Phikwe in the northeast, has been providing 40 percent of Greater Gaborone's water via a pipeline called the North-South Carrier (NSC). According to the WUC, the NSC could provide 100 percent of Gaborone's current water demand for up to 20 months. By that time, it hopes, rainfall will have replenished the Gaborone Dam. WUC admitted, however, that the NSC has a troubled track-record. A recently released report by the Auditor General noted that the glass-reinforced plastic pipes that compose nearly half the carrier have suffered leaks and ruptures, some of which took several days to repair. Permanent Secretary Tombale of the Ministry of Mineral, Energy and Water Resources referred to the leak-prone pipe as "the big risk" in the GOB's planned response to the water crisis.

[1](#)4. (U) In light of this challenge, the Ministry of Minerals, Energy and Water Resources is considering connecting to boreholes in areas now served by the NSC. One proposal would tap into a well field south of Gaborone that had been decommissioned in 1989 after ground water became contaminated by pit latrines used in the nearby village. According to Permanent Secretary Tombale, the GOB hopes to attract assistance from its international partners to help implement this idea.

PRIMARY CAUSE: INFLATED DEMAND

[1](#)5. (SBU) Although rapid population growth -- Gaborone proudly proclaims itself the fastest growing city in Africa -- and lower-than-average rains contributed to this crisis, the primary cause was the lack of proper water conservation measures. Permanent Secretary Tombale conceded that Botswana has not behaved as a water-scarce country in the past, resulting in an "inflated demand." While highly subsidized and unaccountable delivery of water in rural areas contributes to this problem, Botswana government institutions appear to be the worst offenders. A contact within the Water Affairs Department has documented numerous instances in which Government institutions lose around 50 percent of their water to wastage; in some cases this proportion was as high as 90 percent. Leaking fixtures, automatic flushing urinals, and toilet tanks with excessive capacity accounted for much of this loss. The local press has also decried the verdant hue of lawns at government offices amidst the imposition of water restrictions.

NEW DAMS IN NORTHEAST TO INCREASE SUPPLY

16. (U) Botswana's Ninth National Development Plan (covering 2003-2009) called for the construction of four new dams. One of these, Ntimbale Dam (35 million cubic meters) is already under construction. Word that the diamond mine in Orapa is beginning to run out of water prompted the GOB to advance its timetable for building the 400 million cubic meter Lower Shashe Dam. The GOB encountered such setbacks with the Ntimbale project that it hopes to hire a consultant to oversee the USD 175 million Lower Shashe project, along with the construction of two other dams (one of 35 million cubic meters and another of 100 million cubic meters). Depending on how long it takes to resolve concerns reportedly raised by South Africa about the impact on its downstream water supply, the GOB would like to initiate work on Lower Shashe Dam in 2006. The Government estimates that it will take three years to finish this project.

17. (U) Although contacts inside and outside the Government have criticized its tendency to ignore demand reduction, it has taken some initial steps in this direction. The Ministry of Minerals, Energy, and Water has introduced coin-operated water dispensers in four villages and distributed tokens to enable families to obtain a basic amount of water for free, beyond which they have to pay. Initial results suggest a significant decrease in water use in the pilot villages, sparking increased interest from local authorities in other areas of the country. The Ministry has introduced this technology slowly, fearing that it lacks the technical capacity to keep the units in proper working order. Permanent Secretary Tombale told PolOff that he intends to take advantage of this crisis to promote water conservation measures, such as using untreated water for non-consumptive purposes like construction.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) Water is a political commodity in Botswana. The Government is reluctant to eliminate substantial subsidies in rural areas where the ruling Botswana Democratic Party is strongest, knowing that this would hasten the penetration of opposition parties into the countryside. Conversely, poor urban neighborhoods that tend to support opposition parties frequently endure water cuts that last for days, an inconvenience that up market residential areas are spared.

19. (SBU) Gaborone's water crisis offers opportunities to strengthen the US-Botswana partnership. The Mission hosted a digital videoconference on the subject of water conservation to help energize local discussions of how to deal with this challenge. The GOB hopes to obtain assistance from the US or other international partners to finance and implement its planned water infrastructure projects. This presents an opportunity to support Botswana's continued economic growth while potentially assisting US exporters.

HUGGINS